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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 000972

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [SOCI](#) [NI](#)

SUBJECT: MIXED REACTIONS AS NIGERIA MARKS DEMOCRACY DAY

REF: ABUJA 878

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1. Begin Summary: On May 29, 2005, Nigeria marked six years since President Obasanjo's return to power. Reactions to the celebration of Obasanjo's inaugurations were mixed. While some Nigerians say it is six years of democratic rule, others argue it is merely a return to civil rule devoid of the ingredients of democracy. In Kogi and Ekiti states violence marred the day's celebrations (SEPTTEL). In Lagos, the state government led a mass rally against continued seizure of Local Council funds by the Federal government in spite of a Supreme Court judgment. Most newspaper editorials and commentaries scored the administration low on economy, health, security, education and anti-corruption crusade. For ordinary Nigerians, the measure of good governance is the ability of the government to put food on their tables. But there is one agreement among all shades of opinions: It is not yet celebration time. End summary.

PERFORMING THE RITUAL

2. On May 29, Nigerians marked six years of return to civil rule without the usual flying of banners and buntings. President Obasanjo in his traditional radio and television broadcast made no far reaching policy announcement. But in a public lecture organized by the leadership of the Central Bank of Nigeria, the president promised to reform the "highly monetized" political system. "We have to move from politics of patronage and politics of money", he said. Attempting to assure that his presidency is not out to "deceive Nigerians", Obasanjo characteristically warned that he would not "succumb to flattery, harassment, blackmail, intimidation and threat." Attendance at the public lecture was by invitation only.

3. In Nasarawa, the state government announced a cancellation of all planned programs for the day citing "security reasons". It further banned all unauthorized public gatherings and processions "until further notice." In Kogi state, Governor Ibrahim Idris was prevented from giving a prepared speech by hoodlums who fired sporadically into the crowd. A similar incident was recorded in Ekiti state, where celebrations came to an abrupt conclusion as a result of apparently well-organized violent demonstrations.

"THIS IS NOT A DEMOCRACY"

4. Die-hard critics of the Obasanjo administration such as Lagos lawyer, Gani Fawehinmi, dismiss the six years of Obasanjo as a charade. Fawehinmi is currently suing the President for using his official position to launch a private project - the controversial Presidential Library in the President's home town of Otta - and win donations from state governments and oil companies to fund it. Chief Fawehinmi noted that during the six years of President Obasanjo's administration, corruption has been on the increase and "is much worse" than under General Sani Abacha.

5. Second republic Minister and representative at the Political Reform Conference, Alhaji Umaru Dikko, decried the various economic policies of the last six years, saying they lack the backing of Nigerians. An umbrella organization of opposition political parties, known as the Conference of Nigerian Political Parties (CNPP) in a three-page statement was less charitable, describing Obasanjo's tenure as "six years of regime failure."

6. Prominent northern politician, Alhaji Shettima Ali Monguno, said much is lacking in the current democratic dispensation. Monguno, a first republic Petroleum Minister described Obasanjo's record as "a democracy of the elite, by the elite, for the elite which makes the gap between the rich and the poor wider." Second Republic governor of Borno State, Alhaji Mohammed Goni, known for his frankness, described the six years as a "disaster." Former presidential aspirant and member of the ruling party Abubakar Rimi says the fight against corruption in the last six years has been "selective" at best.

"WE ARE DOING WELL, BUT..."

17. Ms. Ayo Obe, former president, Civil Liberties Organization, (CLO), says that Nigeria is not a "complete democracy," but rather had experienced a "return to civilian rule." In reference to the foundations of Nigeria's Fourth Republic, Ms. Obe says you cannot expect to "get genuine elections arranged by a panic-stricken military dictatorship." She did, however, give a pass to the government for at least "recognizing some fundamental freedoms associated with democracy." Ms. Obe, a member of the International Crisis Group, stated her worry about Nigeria's international reputation.

17. Human Rights lawyer Femi Falana is of the opinion that the six years of the Obasanjo administration is a bittersweet story. While condemning corrupt practices pervading the polity, executive disobedience of court injunctions, falling standards of living, and the West's takeover of the economy, Chief Falana admits that there is no absolute freedom in any democracy. What worried Falana most are the protracted court cases on election matters. Two years into his second term, he commented, the court is yet to rule on election petitions against the president.

18. Dr. Magnus Kpakol, head of GON,s poverty alleviation program (NAPEP) and former economic reform insider, said the war against poverty is being won. While Kpakol,s keeps a symbolic pair of boxing gloves in his office to signify the fight against poverty, many Nigerians believe the program is nothing more than the symbol. Charles Soludo, governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), said the nations, economic reform agenda and its National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) program form part of the tripod for sustaining Nigeria's democracy.

INDICES FOR JUDGMENT

18. Most Nigerians who commented on the present administration's performance in the last six years criticized the continued rise in unemployment, increasing poverty, poor health facilities in the country, crisis in the educational sector, insecurity, corrupt practices among public officers, and poor performance of public utilities. According to Obe, for the ordinary Nigerian the economy is reflected in the following questions: a) Am I personally financially better off? b) Have I got a job? c) Am I earning enough to pay my bills? and d) Do my children have jobs? Femi Falana however, argues that not all democratic dividends are measurable. "One thing we must all acknowledge in terms of the gains we have recorded is the expansion of the democratic space," he said.

MEDIA REACTIONS

19. Some respondents to a Voice of America (VOA) survey on the gains recorded in Nigeria in the last six years mockingly refer to soaring inflation, the demolition exercise in parts of Abuja, (Reftel), and the ineffective power supply as "dividends of democracy." The Vanguard, a Lagos-based independent newspaper, carried a front page cartoon on the day of the anniversary, that scored the Obasanjo administration high only in the introduction of GSM phones and his continued frequent foreign trips, the subject of widespread condemnation by Nigerians. The paper scored the administration low in education, health, agriculture, sports and security. A tabloid owned by a member of the ruling party, Sunday Sun, in an editorial described the May 29 celebration as "a symbolic hollow ritual" and decried "lack of sincerity which pervades government's business". The editorial concludes, "We cannot as a people say that the six years of civil rule has brought smiles to the people."

COMMENT

110. While Nigerians continue to argue about the achievements (or lack thereof) of civilian administration since 1999, what worries most Nigerians is the prospect for the 2007 elections. The struggle for who contests the presidency is taking a tribal turn. The South-South geopolitical zone contends that it deserves to produce the next president (and to control the resources accruing from its oil rich land). The North insists that the only divide that matters in Nigeria's politics - North and South - and says Obasanjo has fulfilled the South's quota for eight years. End comment.
CAMPBELL